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ABSTRACT

Academe's values of "deferred gratification" and "work hard now to prepare for the future" are replaced in the world of work by such values as the "future is now" and "immediate results." The outside world, not the textbooks, has provided educational experiences for the nontraditional student. The nature of the world of work, the arena where nontraditional students likely spend most of their time, influences the values and expectations they bring into the communications classroom. Nontraditional students have a more solidly formed self-concept, a preference for pragmatism, and an antipathy to theory that distinguish them from traditional students. Strategies that can be used to integrate the theoretical and the practical aspects of public speaking, interviewing, and organizational communication in a way that can be educational for both the nontraditional student and the instructor include (1) teaching communication theory as a diagnostic tool in problem solving, (2) applying theory to analyze familiar communication settings, (3) designing communication exercises set in relevant situations, and (4) evaluating student communication performance in a realistic situation. Coping with the demands of the nontraditional student necessitates an understanding of the unique nature of the student and a willingness to adopt teaching strategies that address those demands. (HOD)

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DOING COMMUNICATION IN THE "REAL WORLD": STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

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DOING COMMUNICATION IN THE "REAL WORLD": STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

A recent report by the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (1980) details the "new academic revolution" in higher education. One of the changes in academe will be increased recruitment and enrollment of the non-traditional student. This paper examines the demands of the non-traditional student and suggests strategies for meeting those demands. Underlying these strategies are two principles: 1) Non-traditional students prefer "doing" communication to talking about communication; and 2) non-traditional students prefer communicating in "realistic," rather than artificially academic, settings.

THE "REAL WORLD" OF THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

While the college classroom promises to be at least one future scene of education for "non-traditionals," the setting for educating many adults in the past has been and at present is the workplace. The nature of the workplace both helps explain and helps determine the way non-traditional students view the educational process.

The workplace has about it a sense of immediacy lacking on campus. The ivory tower environment of serenity and calm reflection has as its counterpart in the workplace the urgency of deadline after deadline. Academe's values of "deferred gratification" and "work hard now to prepare for the future" are replaced in the world of work by such values as "the future is now" and "immediate results". Mintzberg's (1973) description

of the work activities of managers, for example, reflects a typical workday of varied, brief and fragmented tasks. Moreover, the manager's non-reflective approach to work is spent voluntarily on verbal, non-routine, current matters.

The primary reason for the "real world" urgency is economic, for the "bottom line" is inevitably financial. Effectiveness of task performance and efficiency of method are virtues of the workplace. Since "time is money" and since education is a broadly-based and time consuming process, training rather than education is often the means of preparing people to work at specific tasks. Even when education rather than training is the instructional philosophy, the emphasis is on doing rather than reflecting. For example, one of the world's largest consulting groups in personnel matters, the Hay Group, writes in an advertisement of its assessment, education and training activities: "All development programs are based on experiential rather than academic methods".

Some organizations provide educational assistance programs for their members. Among these organizations, the common practice is to secure tuition funding by justifying how particular courses aid the individual's job performance.

Modern technologies further reinforce the economic values of speed and efficiency, often at the expense of reflection and critical evaluation. Information, a key input for modern

organizational and individual existence provides illustrative technologies. On the individual level, for instance, the "soft" technique of speed reading increases the amount of information an individual can receive. A premium is placed on the amount of information taken in, not on what is done with the material. Critical reflection or the simple enjoyment of reading a narrative or a poem are de-emphasized. At the organizational level, the "hard" technology of the computer is essential for almost any modern operation. Clearly computers are useful in freeing "people" resources for other purposes, yet computers, as other technologies, often "do our thinking for us."

Such is the "real world" of many non-traditional students. This environment outside the classroom is the classroom for most non-traditionals. The outside world, not the text book, has provided educational experiences for the non-traditional student. The nature of the world of work, the arena where the non-traditional student likely spends most time, thus influences the values and expectations the non-traditional student brings to class.

SOME LIKELY CHARACTERISTICS OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THOSE CHARACTERISTICS

The characteristics of non-traditional students discussed in this section are termed "likely" because they are based on the experiences of the writer, including numerous casual conversations with others who also teach non-traditional students, and on interviews with eight educators whose primary employment requirement is or was the education of non-traditional students.

The individuals interviewed specifically for this paper were not randomly chosen; rather they were selected because: 1) they had a broad range of educational experiences, including teaching in the university, and business and industry; 2) seven of the eight had taught at different times in both traditional and non-traditional student settings; 3) all had taught at a major research institution while pursuing a graduate degree; 4) several different geographical areas are represented by the eight.

Taken together, the experiences of the eight people interviewed and the present writer are substantial. They represent over 100 years teaching and educational administrative experience, dealing with groups ranging from entering freshman at a community college to top level executives of industry. In between are courses taught for assembly line employees, first line supervisors and part and full-time university students of all descriptions. Currently, the eight individuals interviewed are employed as: community college professor teaching primarily non-traditional students (1); university professor teaching primarily non-traditional students (1); university professor teaching primarily traditional students (3); industry employee in training and organizational development (3).

In addition to the likely characteristics of non-traditional students, implications of these characteristics are discussed.

While there are certainly many areas of similarity between traditional and non-traditional students, the interest here is to focus on differences.

1. AGE. Students of persuasion have long recognized the inverse relationship between age and persuasibility. With increasing age often comes a more solidly formed self-concept, and people frequently develop more stable and established relationship patterns (Knapp, 1978). Along with the relative "firming up" of attitudes may come a reluctance to accept new roles. In addition, credibility of the instructor may be called into question if: 1) the non-traditional student sees the instructor's young age as a sign of lack of experience; or (2) the student perceives the instructor as deficient in "real world" experience, having done little except "teach".

The old saw, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach" dies hard in the workplace. The non-traditional student's carry-over of this anti-educational bias may be considerable. The situation may be especially pronounced if the instructor's teachings contradict the student's long-held values and beliefs. A further potential complication is present when the non-traditional student perceives his/her minority status ("I'm the only old person here"). A final characteristic (only the final to be considered here; there are doubtless others) emanating from age is the likelihood that the non-traditional student, having been away from the classroom longer than the traditional student,

may be lacking the fundamentals of writing, spelling, grammar, etc.

2. PREFERENCE FOR PRAGMATISM. Having lived in the "real world" of work where results count more than formality, the non-traditional student has likely developed a preference for pragmatism. The "textbook formality of proper form" finds little room at the "bottom line". Reflexive rather than reflective action seems to characterize most actions. As a result, the norm of "do something, even if it is wrong" may guide action. The concern for action rather than thought is contained in at least one CEO's rhetorical question in response to criticism of someone's action: "Where were you when the page was blank?"

Of course, the workplace does have a "proper form"; however, this proper form is not the same as that of academe. As one secretary put it, "Work is a lot like school; you just have to find out what the teacher (boss) wants and give it to him." The proper form for most non-traditional students most of the time, therefore, is not proper grammar, spelling, speaking, documentation, support of ideas, etc. Rather, it is an oft-abbreviated, sometimes "incorrect" statement designed to accomplish a particular task. Thus, the principle of audience adaptation is evident in both settings. The different natures of the audience, however, necessitate the accommodation of vastly different values.

Essentially, these contrasting values are "academic" thought and "productive" action. Hence, while the university strives to help each student reach the highest possible level of excellence, the world of work stresses accomplishing a minimum acceptable level of performance. Whereas the classroom demands increasing levels of quality, the workplace may make demands for greater quantity or timeliness.

3. ANTIPATHY TO THEORY. Closely akin to the preference for pragmatism is the antipathy to theory. At least three factors may help account for the non-traditional student's dislike for the theoretical. First, the everyday lessons of life, especially if they contradict previous academic training, emphasize the practical. Where stress is placed on speed, action and solutions there is little concern for looking at larger issues. Contrast the manager's job, for example, with that of the university social scientist. The manager must make specific decisions concerning specific individuals and situations. He wants to know about "this case", not about a "general case" which is rightfully the concern of the professor. While the professor may be concerned with questions of "why" and "under what conditions", the manager is more concerned with questions of "what to do" and "how to do it".

A second factor contributing to the anti-theoretical orientation may be the non-traditional's perception that "5 easy lessons" may be all that is needed. Surely there exist

enough paperbacks by "Ph.D.'s" and "Dr.'s" which tell "all there is to know" about almost any area of human behavior in 250 pages or less of well-padded pulp. It is not uncommon for even "academic types" to cater to the practical orientation of non-traditionals. Recently a bulletin board in the cafeteria of an urban university with a large population of non-traditional students held a notice reading in part: "Want a job ? In one day we can show you how. No theory, just techniques that work." Along with the warning that the class would fill fast (so hurry) and the fee ($50) was the name of the instructor,, a Ph.D.

A final factor is the lack of understanding of the importance of research (and of theory in guiding that research) to the university. Since non-traditional students are of the outside world, they probably have little conception of what a professor actually does. The instructor, after all, probably teaches only 6-15 hours each week. And while some small amount of time may be spent in class preparation and in grading tests, what does a professor do with the remaining half of the week? Just as a professor's income is rarely well estimated by most students, so too are his use of time and his key concern rarely perceived by those outside the ivory tower. Such dubious distinctions as a certain Senator's Golden Fleece Awards may help educate the public about research, but certainly not in a positive way.

STRATEGIES

This brief list is intended not to be comprehensive, but to serve as a starting point. It is a combination of theoretical and experiential components, providing not only techniques, but the "why" behind them. Examples are drawn from the writer's experiences in university classes and training sessions on topics including public speaking, interpersonal communication, interviewing and organizational communication.

1. TEACH THEORY TO THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT. Because of the biases the non-traditional student against matters theoretical, this is an important and difficult strategy to implement. In some cases, as in industrial settings, the word "theory" may never be used, with "principles" or "background factors" serving as substitutes. By whatever term it is addressed, however, theory must be addressed. Key questions to be treated are: What is a theory? Why is it important? How did this particular theory begin? Why? What are its limitations?

Of particular importance to the pragmatically - oriented non-traditional student may be the importance of theory as a diagnostic tool in problem solving. Most social science theories, for instance, can be shown to suggest areas to

inspect for "causes" of problems. A second reason theory may prove attractive to the non-traditional student is because theories transcend situations. Thus a theory may serve as a guide to future action in an unfamiliar setting, as the theory can help reduce the uncertainty attendant to an unfamiliar situation. There are obviously many other ways theory could benefit the non-traditional student; the two above have been easy to "sell" for the writer.

2. HELP THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT APPLY THEORY IN ANALYZING FAMILIAR SETTINGS. The burden here is clearly the student's, for the student gathers the data to support the theory. For example, students may describe their most rewarding communication experiences to provide examples of social exchange theory at work. Or, students may keep diaries of their interactions with new acquaintances over a period of time. These diaries may be analyzed in terms of a number of theories of friendship formation, attraction, etc. Or, students may be asked to report critical incidents concerning most any matter. Such data may be used to illustrate a number of theories (or even models).

3. HELP THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT DESIGN AN EXERCISE SET IN A RELEVANT SITUATION. One way to help assure that applications of principles are made in terms that the student

finds realistic is to have the student design an exercise to illustrate those principles. Because this design experience places a large burden on the student, specific instructions often prove helpful. Pacilio (1969) offers such instructions for an interviewing exercise. Because Pacilio (1969) and Goyer, Redding and Rickey (1968) from which the instructions are adapted are both out of print, the instructions are provided here, by permission of Pacilio, in an appendix.

4. EVALUATE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN A REALISTIC SITUATION. This evaluation may be based on the student designed exercises above or on other situations constructed by the instructor. The latter approach may take several forms. For instance, if the instructor knows something of the commonly encountered situations of the student, then the instructor may simply have the students play roles in a scenario. The writer used such an approach in training audioprosthologists (hearing aid specialists) in interviewing.

A second form of instructor-constructed situations is based on what Graen (1976) terms an open systems approach to research. The instructor, without making unchecked assumptions about the situations faced by the non-traditional students, first interviews several of them to discover the nature of the "world" in which they operate. Topics covered in such interviews would likely be climate of workplace, job responsibilities, personal concerns, etc. Only after extensive data gathering does

the instructor construct exercises. The writer used this "open systems" approach to construct scenarios for training evaluators of nuclear power plants in interviewing.

A final form takes not nearly so much time on the part of the instructor. Here the instructor simply instructs the student to set the stage and then perform. Writing and public speaking exercises seem to work well here, and the instructor simply evaluates on the basis of fundamental tenents and an analysis of the audience. The danger of this form lies in the lack of instructor knowledge of the student constructed situation. This form has worked for the writer in helping teach policemen how to give a ticket, attorneys how to present after-dinner speeches and electric utilities employees how to explain rate increases.

CONCLUSION

Non-traditional students promise to grow in numbers in the years ahead. Coping with their demands necessitates an understanding of the uniqueness of the non-traditional student and a willingness to adopt teaching strategies which address those demands. However, it is not necessary to abandon traditional theoretical matters to meet the pragmatic concerns of the non-traditional students. This paper has offered at least one approach to integrating the theoretical and the practical in a way that can be educational for both the non-traditional student and the instructor.

NOTES

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the help of Harveda Moon, Dorian Conger and John Pacilio, Jr., in constructing this paper. Responsibility for errors, of course, remains with the writer.

APPENDIX

PREPARING TO INTERVIEW

John Pacilio, Jr., and W. Charles Redding

I. Need for advanced preparation for interviewing.

A. In general, most interviews fail because people think they can "play it by ear" and neglect to prepare for this complex process in advance.

B. In classroom situation, advanced preparation is critical since you are involved in an artificial situation which only simulates reality; thus, you must create the situation and provide sufficient information for your partner to play his "E" role.

II. Instructions for preparing interview case materials.**

A. Source of case material.
   1. Situation which you have or will someday experience.
   2. May modify published case material only as last resort.

B. Your basic purpose.
   1. Create a realistic problem in which you will attempt to exemplify optimum communication behavior.
   2. Do not plan to exemplify poor communication behavior.

C. Your role.
   1. You will be the person who has the burden for the success of the interview which means you will be the "R" (remember the applicant is the R in an employment interview).
   2. In all cases you will be expected to play yourself--under no circumstances should you try to role play attitudes, personality, or value systems other than your own.

D. Scope and content of written case material.
   1. Length: basic case should be about two typewritten (double spaced) pages (not counting supplements) so that it can be read aloud in class in a few minutes--you will not read the supplements aloud.
   2. Content of basic case: cover the following main points.
      a. Introduction--brief paragraph in which you identify:
         (1) Type of interview (infor., employ., persuas., etc.).
         (2) Position or status of R and E.
         (3) Relationship between R and E (if any prior to interview).
         (4) When appropriate also indicate:
            (a) Facts known by both parties.
            (b) Facts known only by R.
            (c) Facts known only by E.

b. R and E's specific purposes.
(1) What each hopes to accomplish in the interview.
(2) Indicate if one or other goes into the interview "cold."
c. Time and place of interview: indicate if place is identified with either party (office, home, etc.).
d. R's frame of mind:
(1) At start of interview.
(2) Events leading up to interview (if appropriate).
e. Psychological factors relevant to E:
(1) Be unusually careful to discuss only.
(a) Actions or words of E observed directly by you in the past; or,
(b) Actions or words of E reported to you by a third party (in this case you would have to evaluate the reliability of such testimony).
(2) Be sure to indicate explicitly the sources of your information.

E. Required supplementary materials.**
1. Information getting interview.
a. List of unscheduled questions (divided by type), or
b. An interview schedule.
2. Employment interview.
a. Application form (on yourself as you will be applicant).
b. Brief description of job for which you are applying.
c. Company brochure (if possible--see University Placement Service) or brief description of company.
3. Persuasive interview.
a. Analysis of case problem.
b. Personal analysis of E.

F. Mechanical details.
1. No special props--plan to use classroom environment and furniture.
2. No need to dress specially for occasion (unless it helps you perform better, feel more confident, etc.).

G. Miscellaneous details.
1. Since you only have eight to ten minutes to perform your interview, don't worry about finishing--be sure to start at the beginning (a critical part of the interview), and keep going until you are stopped by your instructor.
2. Type (or print legibly) the basic case (as outlined above) and the required supplements in an original plus two carbon copies; turn in one copy to your instructor and another copy to your "E" on the date specified on your Schedule of Activities and Assignments.

III. Classroom procedures.

A. R reads basic case (not supplements) to class and leaves room.
B. Instructor advises E on his role (won't change basic case facts).
C. Interview takes place.

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